

Understanding Historical Legacies of Racial Violence

Hedwig Lee
Duke University

“The past is never dead. It’s not even in the past.”

William Faulkner

THE
ANNALS
of the American Academy of
Political and Social Science



VOLUME 694 | MARCH 2021

Legacies of Racial Violence: Clarifying and
Addressing the Presence of the Past

Special Editors: David Cunningham, Hedwig Lee, and Geoff Ward

‘The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning’ (Claudia Rankine June 22, 2015 NYT)



Mamie Till Mobley and other mourners at the funeral of her son, Emmett Till, in Chicago in September 1955. Emmett Till was abducted, tortured, and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 at the age of 14, after being accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store.
Photo Credit: Creative Commons



Erica Garner at a 2016 protest. Her father, Eric Garner, died after being put in a chokehold by a New York City police officer. Eric Garner was seen on video saying, "I can't breathe" 11 times before he died in July 2014. She died after suffering brain damage following a heart attack in December 2017. She was 27 years old.
Photo Credit: Creative Commons



Funeral procession of George Floyd's body in Pearland, Texas in June 2020. George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest made after a store clerk suspected Floyd may have used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, on May 25, 2020. The officer pressed his knee to Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds while Floyd was handcuffed face down in the street.
Photo Credit: Creative Commons



Vice President Kamala Harris at the memorial service for Tyre Nichols, who died following a January 7 assault by Memphis police, at the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis, Tennessee (February 2023).
Photo Credit: Lawrence Jackson

“This violent act was not in pursuit of public safety. It was not in the interest of keeping the public safe. Because one must ask: Was not it in the interest of keeping the public safe that Tyre Nichols would be with us here today?...Was he not also entitled to the right to be safe?”

'The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning' (Claudia Rankine June 22, 2015 NYT)

"...daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black."

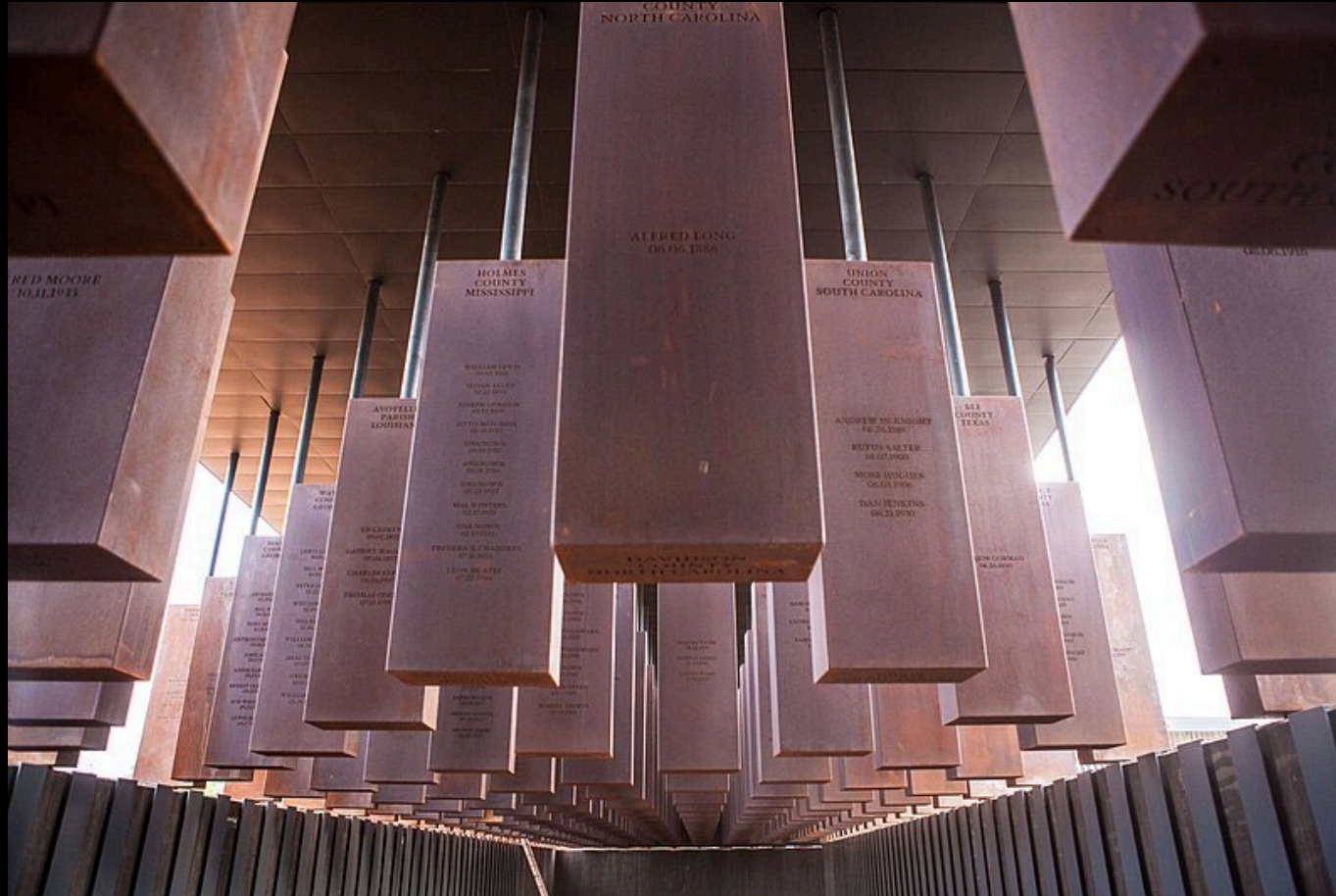
'The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning' (Claudia Rankine June 22, 2015 NYT)

"We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against."

The lasting impact of historical racial violence

- Histories of enslavement, lynching, Civil-Rights Movement-era repression, and other forms of racial violence are linked to violent contention in the same places today.
 - Black victim homicide rates (Messner et. al. 2015; Petersen + Ward 2015; Gabriel + Tolnay 2017)
 - White supremacist mobilization (Durso + Jacobs 2013)
 - Racial residential segregation (Defina + Hammond 2011)
 - Death penalty policy support (Messner et. al. 2009; Rigby + Seguin, 2021)
 - Corporal punishment in school (Ward et. al. 2019)
 - Life expectancy (Kihlström + Kirby, 2021)
 - Heart disease mortality (Kramer et. al. 2017)
 - Infant mortality (Krieger et. al. 2013)
 - ... and more

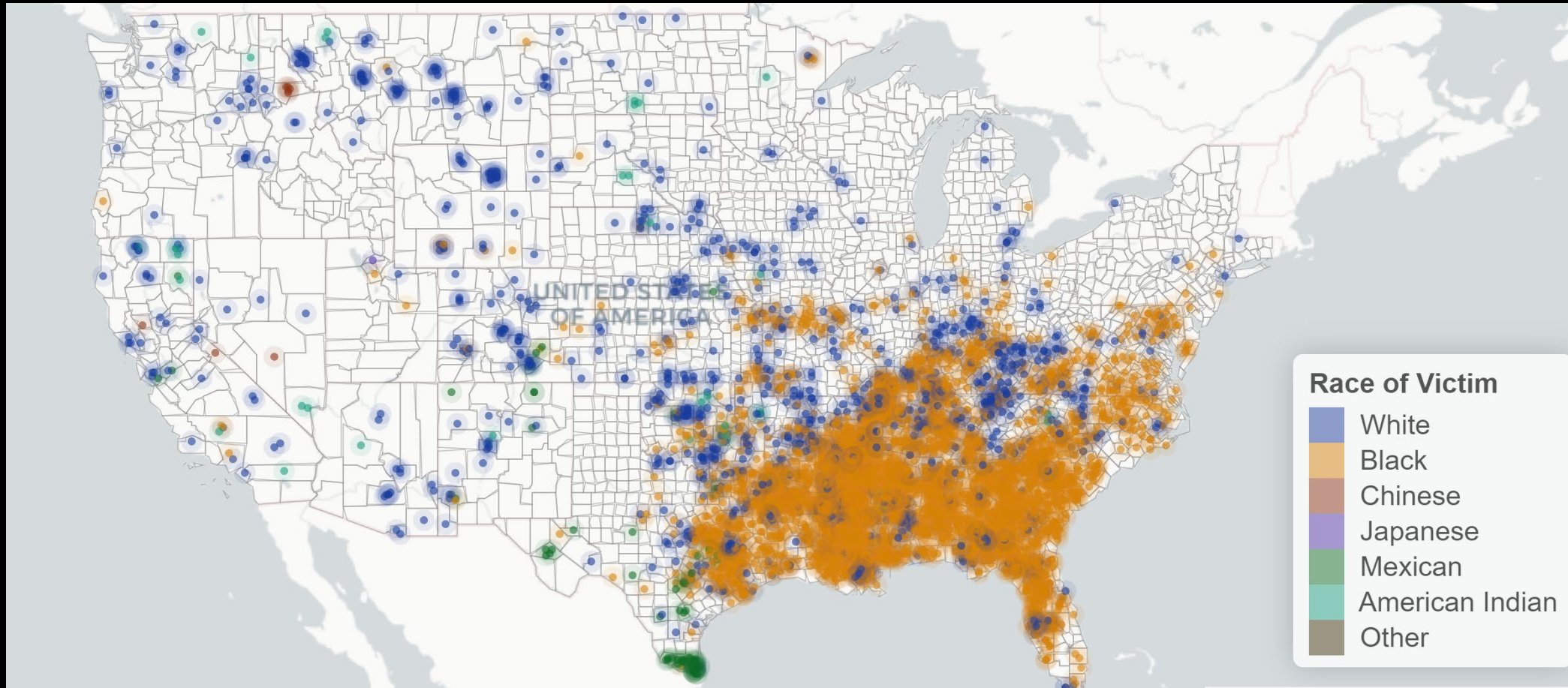
The History of Lynching in the United States



The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opened to the public on April 26, 2018, is the nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.

Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The History of Lynching in the United States



Lynching Dot Map: One Dot for every Lynching Victim in the US 1883-1941
Map created by David Rigby, Alison Appling + Charles Seguin

The History of Lynching in the United States

- Lynchings were an explicit form of social control.
 - Not about enacting “justice”; were instead symbolic, public, excessively violent events that were meant to establish control over and terrorize (newly freed) black populations in a local area.

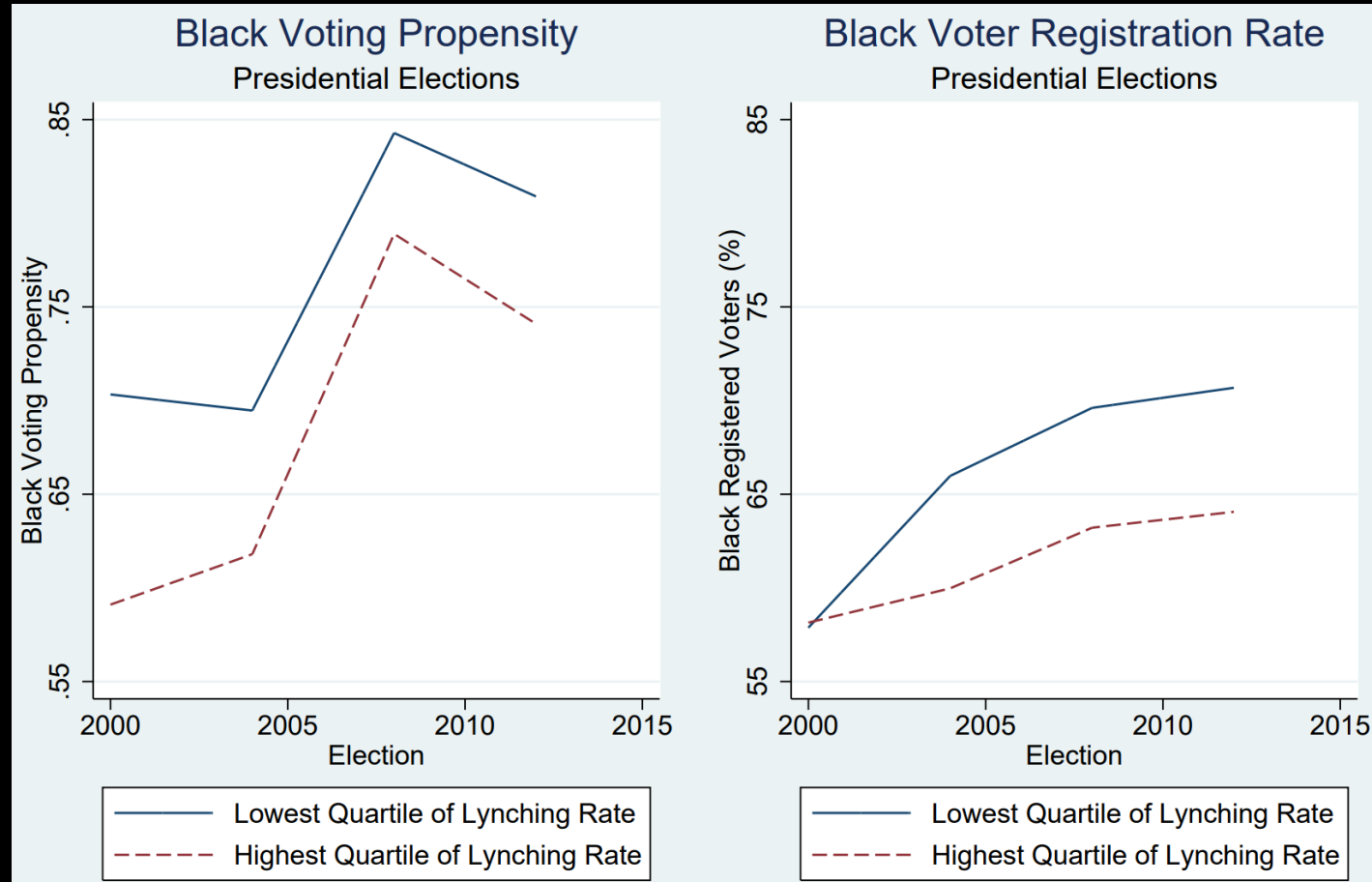
The History of Lynching in the United States

- Lynching events had a tremendous, immediate impact on the social climate of the areas in which they occurred. Lynching served to create local socio-cultural environments where:
 1. antebellum notions of white superiority were allowed to live on past slavery;
 2. blacks were discouraged from participating in politics and utilizing new found rights;
 3. shared, hostile attitudes towards blacks were re-enforced and re-invigorated.
- Useful to think of lynchings as a post-slavery means of establishing and maintaining environments of racial dominance that might have otherwise weakened post-slavery.

The Lasting Social Consequences of Lynching

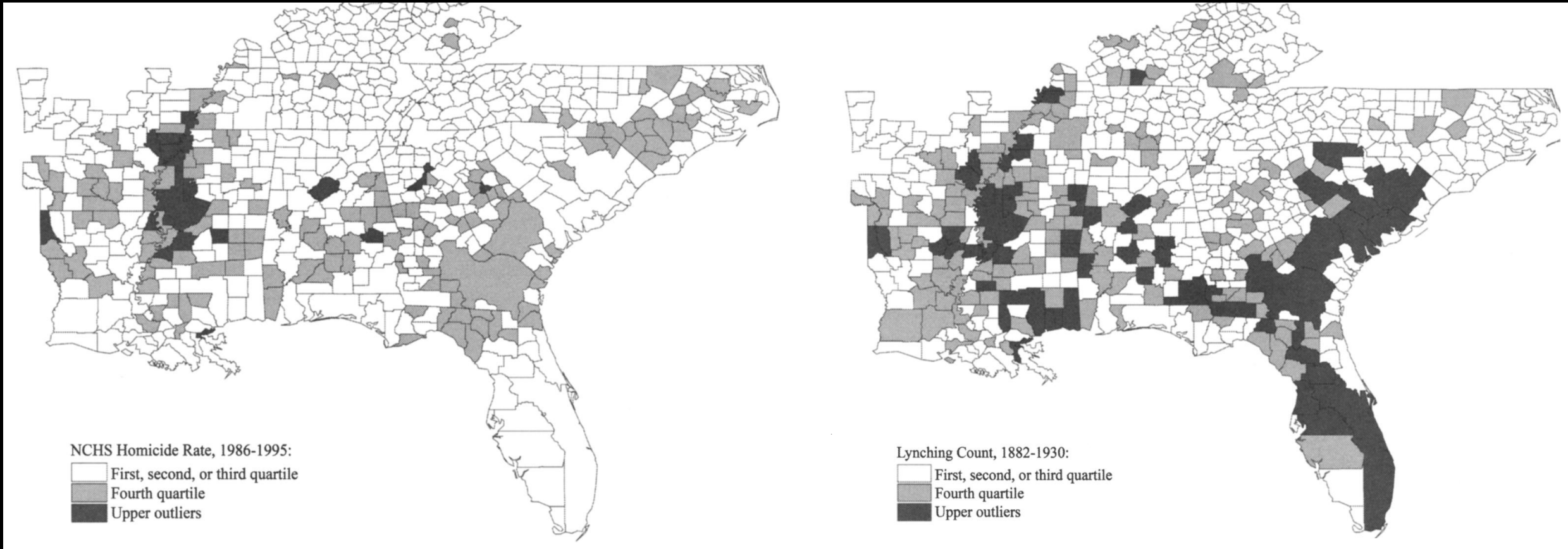
Though lynching events largely disappeared after the mid-20th century, the racialized socio-cultural environments that they created still persist to this day.

Lasting Social Consequences of Lynching: Lynching + Voting



Source: Williams, 2018

Lasting Social Consequences of Lynching: Lynching + Homicide



Source: Messner et al., 2005

Lasting Social Consequences of Lynching: Overall

- Overall, an emerging literature demonstrates that counties w/ more lynching homicides in the past currently display:
 1. elevated hostile, anti-black attitudes;
 2. a strong perceived sense of white superiority/racial hierarchy;
 3. well-worn norms about who is allowed to participate in public life
- Suggests that lynching events have shaped—and continue to shape—modern day social outcomes in the U.S.

“Not only is the past not past, it is the future that looms on the horizon.”

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

Thank You

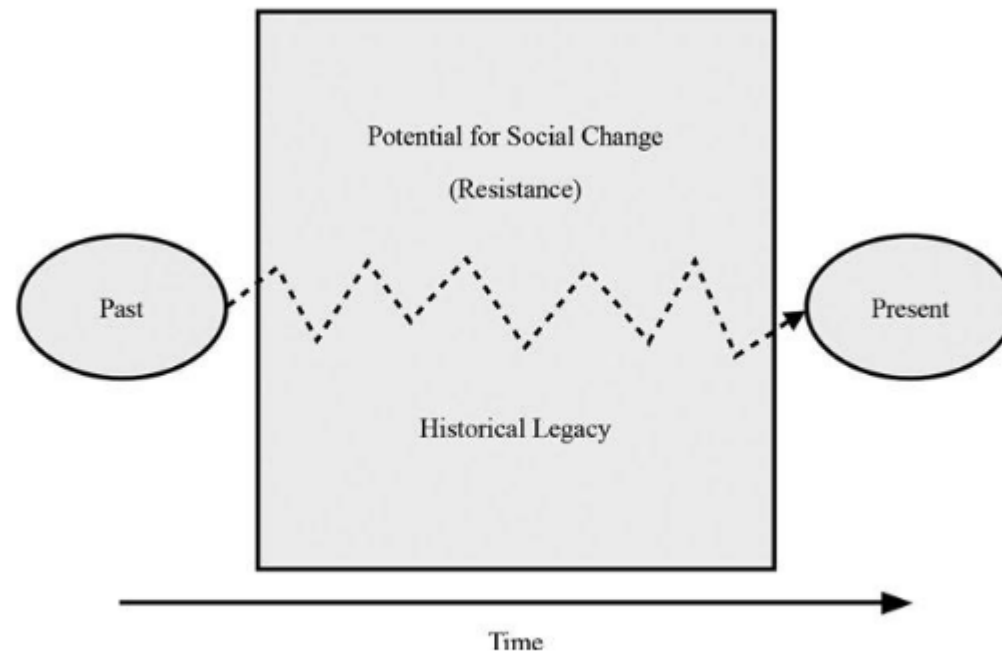


Figure 1. Heuristic conceptual model depicting the operation of a historical legacy.

Source: Gabriel + Tolnay, 2017